

FEBRUARY 13, 2025 MSGR. SAMUEL BIANCO

Woman, Gentile, Syrophoenician. We're dealing with blood, religion, gender, race, and geography, all thrown together in this one situation that Jesus goes beyond his territory. The Syrophoenicians, also known as the Canaanites, they were the lifelong blood enemies of the Jews. By blood enemies, I mean they killed one another. And if you went into their territory, you could be killed; and if they were in yours, they could kill you. They had just a wildly different understanding of religion. And so, the way they handled it, unfortunately, was often enough, seeing that they killed one another in the name of their religion or their rights. And, of course, we're dealing with a higher-- a very powerful patriarchal society. In spite of what's said in the first reading, the intimacy between man and woman, that wasn't present in that society. It was patriarchal. And the women, even to be present, to be there, was itself a challenge to the kind of structures that were there.

So, they were dealing with a story with high amounts of prejudice and difficulty and tension. And into that, this woman breaks through the crowd and she comes to Jesus. Jesus is there. We're guessing he's tired, he's been weary. He's been walking and teaching. And he comes and-- if you will, and on a human level, we're almost seems he's being pestered again. And so, he responds to the woman's plea, and he responds to her in a way, and it can be disguised as only in an insult, using the reference about dog-like or being that kind of beyond the bounds. Now, some people suggest, "Well, he really didn't mean that." Actually, it was a parable; he was trying to illustrate to people something about how the Gospel and what he was doing. And he was also trying to say to people that the priority, the good news belonged first to the Jews, and other people were lower than that. All that having been said, it is still a very powerful and tough statement that Jesus issues. And we need to know

that there are cultural and religious realities that Jesus was present to. Often, he transcended the cultural boundaries of his time.

We know, not only with this woman, but he spoke to the woman at the well, asked her for a glass of water - an unusual thing for a woman, without someone being there, to talk to a man. So, Jesus broke through the boundaries often enough. At other times, he was bound by the limitations of the culture, of the society he lived with and worked with. I mean, part of it, of course, is as a human being and his limitation. If he tripped on a stone, he injured his feet. But he also was bound, in some ways, by the limitations of the culture he belonged to. And that sometimes means that what comes out in Jesus are things that we need to grasp with. It means that Jesus himself, in his humanity, is struggling with the limitations. Scholars say one of those limitations is evident. You remember when he's in agony, he cries out in despair, "Let this chalice pass from me." Those are words of despair. He doesn't act on them, but that's what is in his heart and in his emotions.

And the same thing is true today. He says words that he, uh-- come out, but as he begins to reflect and think on them, that's not the heart, that's not how he acts. In the end, he acts in such a way that he heals this woman. And that's how the Gospel spreads. It went from the confines of Israel and the Jewish people beyond the borders, to other people, to other races and genders, and that's what this woman and Jesus do in talking and healing to today's Gospel. So, that's one half of the story. The other half is important, too, I think. The woman comes and she bridges the gap between women, race, religion, and prejudice, and she jumps over the gap. And some people say, "Well, she's only doing it because she's desperate, her daughter's ill," and that's true, but there's something more here.

I think we recognize that, in spite of the words that Jesus used, in spite of the fact that he comes from a different culture, religion, and place, she sees something in Jesus of the divine, something of God's presence, something that she wants to acknowledge and truly needs. Yes, there are limitations there in the way Jesus acts, but the limitations don't bind her. Here's what Pope Francis says. He says, "God, in some ways, sought to limit himself in order to seek cooperation with his work," and that gives us a clue. Yes, there are limitations, and God, in Jesus, limits himself sometimes to the culture of his time and place. But what breaks through that limitation is the initiative, the grace, the presence of human beings. Our freedom counts for so very much to God that, whatever limitations are there, he wants us not to be bound by them, but to use our own strength, our desire, our pity, our understanding to break through the limitations and to create new ways of being together, new ways of healing.

And this woman, who had the courage and the initiative to best Jesus in conversation, she challenged him, and she took on his parable and flipped it on its back and turned it on him. If you look at the Catholic Church all over the world, you'll see we represent a diversity of races and peoples, over a billion people of different backgrounds. Well, we're here today. That diversity, that's in part because of this woman and her relationship with Jesus. She brought us into the fold, and Jesus welcomed all of us of different backgrounds, and gave us the grace to see the beauty and the goodness of God. A Catholic priest sociologist-- dead now-- his name is Andrew Greeley. Andrew Greeley says, "Catholic means, 'Look out, here comes everybody,'" and that better be the case. Everybody must be brought in. Everybody must be made to feel welcome. In freedom, I say, must be brought in. In freedom, they must be welcomed and open. Whatever the background, tradition, or

history is, if they see the grace of God and want it and desire it, good grief-- not good grief - that's what God offers, that's what Jesus offers to everyone. And we pray that, whatever our limitations of the human experience will be, we'll go beyond the limitation and be touched by the beauty, the grace, and the healing power of Jesus.